

WILDHORSE MANAGEMENT ON THE MODOC NATIONAL FOREST



The Modoc National Forest Devil's Garden Plateau Wild Horse Territory is comprised of roughly 300,000 acres of National Forest and Bureau of Land Management land (BLM). Included are portions of 8 cattle grazing allotments on the Doublehead and Devil's Garden Ranger Districts. A population objective (Herd Management Level [HML]) of 275-335 horses was established in the 1980 Herd Management Plan and reaffirmed in 1991 with the Modoc National Forest Land and Resource Plan that is used as a guide to overall Forest Management.

The Devil's Garden is aptly named. While the terrain is relatively flat, horses range through a rough and rocky lava plateau. Stock water is often limited. Juniper encroachment has steadily decreased the amount of forage available for use; and soils, typically characterized by hardpan substrate, restrict water infiltration, resulting in low forage production potential. During the early winter, before ground freeze and spring thaw, there is high potential for soil compaction from the horses.



Historically, horses have run on the Devil's Garden Plateau for more than 140 years. Many of the early horses escaped from settlers during the Indian wars or were released when their usefulness as domestic animals ended. In later years, like many areas throughout the west, local area ranchers released their domestic horses out to graze, and then gathered them as they were needed. Not all were ever captured. Record high numbers of horses were bred for the military during World War I. By 1947, concern about the deteriorated range conditions prompted the removal of 287 unclaimed trespass horses. Periodic efforts to remove "trespass" horses continued until 1971.

With the passage of the 1971 Wild Horse and Burro Act (PL 92-195), private horse roundups ended. In 1974, as an initial step toward management, the Forest Service inventoried the Devil's Garden Wild Horse population and estimated herd size to be 500 horses. The Modoc began contracting the capture of excess horses in 1976. Approximately, 260 excess horses were removed during the period 1976-1978. Even with this effort, by 1979, the population had doubled to 1,000 horses. This prompted the Modoc to enter into an





agreement with the BLM's Susanville District. BLM's expertise coupled with the use of a helicopter to locate and assist in moving the horses, resulted in removing 388 excess horses in 1979. Our cooperative arrangement with BLM continues today.

The major challenge that faces the Modoc National

Forest in managing the Devil's Garden Wild Horse Territory is the cost. The program costs have skyrocketed from about \$350/horse for capture and adoption in 1990 to over \$1500/horse in 2002.



Between 1985 and 1989, BLM has gathered about 60 horses from the Modoc annually. In 1990, our spring census indicated that the herd size had increased. This increase was the result of a series of mild winters; less than normal death loss; and a foal crop about 20% rather than the predicted 15%. Herd size was now estimated to be 469 horses and mules. A major commitment to reduce the population toward the established herd size was made by gathering 275 head of horses in September 1991. Of the horses gathered, more than 90 horses were determined to be five years old and over and were

returned to the Forest.

During the winter of 1992-93, higher than normal winter snow pack and longer winter cold months resulted in a large die off of the very young and old horses across the territory. Population estimates taken during the spring 1993 indicated we had around 200 horses. With this estimate, we felt it was

best to allow the herd to repopulate itself rather than introduce new horses from herds located in Nevada. We estimated the herd would reach our population objective size within 5 years. However the die off, due to the hard winter, resulted in the average age of the herd to change from 15 years to 7 years old. In turn, the offspring production doubled and reached the population objective in 3 years instead of 5 years. Current foal crop in the territory is now about 40% and recruitment is around 30%. Continued funding at the 1991 base rate has not allowed us to manage the herd expansion.

In 2002, based on actual herd records and BLM wild horse population models, we gathered approximately 200 head annually until 2006. The present population (2011) is estimated to be over 1100 head of horses before the foal crop is counted. During the last round-up, which was completed in 2006, 219 head were gathered. Of these, 53% were under 5 years of age and met the criteria to become part of the Wild Horse Adoption program. The remaining Wild Horses were sent to sanctuaries.

The Devil's Garden Horses are one of the most sought after horses in the BLM's adoption program. Most of the horses (Devil's Garden RD) are classified as light draft and are a favorite with the Amish, packers, and wagon users. The finer boned horses (Doublehead RD) are popular with the endurance and working stock equestrian user. For the most part, our horses are in the best physical condition of those, which go through the adoption program. Although these horses may be in the good overall condition, the range condition is also a major factor when setting up HML.